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2011-05-27

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Recommended Citation

Fay, B.: When Is an Artwork?:Bergson's Progress and the Art object. The Perception of Change: Space, time, and mobility after Henri Bergson:One Day Symposium, Mansfield College Chapel, University College, Oxford, Friday 27th May 2011.

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When is an Artwork? Bergson's Progress and the Art object.

Brian Fay – Presented at *The Perception of Change: Space, time, and mobility after Henri Bergson*.
One Day Symposium, Mansfield College Chapel, Oxford
Friday 27th May 2011.

This presentation will employ Bergson's proposition in *Creative Evolution* that an organism can be perceived 'as a *thing* rather than as a *progress*, forgetting that the very permanence of its form is only the outline of a movement' to an object analysis of the artwork in time.

In attempting to do this I will briefly outline 3 main areas

- One the anachronic and temporal implications of and for the artwork in the light of recent Art historical scholarship
- Two the temporal anomalies that can arise from the conservation of an artwork, particularly in relation to notions of reversibility and as associated with Bergson -
- Three the positioning of drawing practice in the context of simultaneous temporalities.

It may also do the unthinkable for a Bergson Symposium and show an artwork that uses an image from an Einstein lecture.

But perhaps before these are discussed it is necessary to state why Bergson should be considered in relation to object analysis?

Increasingly temporality has been the subject of recent art historical scholarship and art practice. This discourse and work is noted by Peter Osborne in *The Politics of Time* to have a new focus. He argues that in recent Visual arts practice there is a move from the preceding Narrative model – which was a progressive 19th century to late 20th Century Modernist utopian employment of time, (structuring things beginning, middle, end) to a Cosmological treatment of time, a mere dead time of counting. For Osborne Visual Arts interest in Contemporary Science is symptomatic of a shift that marks a depressed regression to nature. It is therefore only marking forms of times that are already there. Only counting.

SHOW FIRST SLIDE

However Osborne perhaps overstates the case in his Narrative versus

Cosmological dialectic. By privileging the action or form of the artwork as the quantitative nature and experience of time, thereby implying a singular model of time; it arguably neglects the phenomenological, semiotic and qualitative readings for a multi-temporality. Bergson perhaps marked and marks the point where the idea of time is not solely a quantitative succession but through the proposition of Duration, Intuition and Progress time can be understood as a qualitative consciousness of simultaneous temporalities. I would not wish this to be perceived as a simple clash of Scientific versus Philosophical analysis of time. For there are obviously shared areas of agreement, different points of arrival at a similar outcome while maintaining the caveats of a distinction in method and potential application. For example as stated by E V Szendrei in his discussion on *Bergson, Prigogine and the Rediscovery of Time*

“While Prigogine shares Bergson’s dissatisfaction with this limitation of classical science, he disagrees with Bergson’s suggestion that the physical sciences are by their methodological characteristics unable to ever provide an adequate account of time.... Bergson was correct in recognizing the exclusions of the sciences of his age, but he has nothing to tell us about any limitations of science today.”

Similarly while recent thinking in contemporary Complexity studies acknowledges much of Bergson’s work, it does not accept the distinction placed by Bergson between living systems and inanimate objects within models of Evolution and progress. And quoting from Graham Coulter-Smith’s *Bergson: Creative Evolution* (2009)

There is accordingly a fundamental problem in Bergson’s philosophy regarding his exclusion of materiality from complexity which rests on his anthropic insistence that evolution is a psychological phenomenon which is to say its essence is psyche or soul which he excludes from inanimate matter.

While not wishing to grant an artwork a soul, it is perhaps the ground opened up by Coulter-Smith’s and Osborne’s analysis that suggest a relevance for a re-application of Bergsonian theory to material objects and artworks within a Cosmological Time context.

So Returning to the list of the 3 areas mentioned

One the Anachronic implications of recent critical thinking

This draws on a stream within Art History from Benjamin, Warburg, Goodman and more recently Didi-Huberman which defines a discrete territory that

challenges the disciplines chronographic structures. The aim of this Anachronic study is to acknowledge the ability of an image or art object to not solely refer to its own time, rather its inherent potential to reference multiple pasts and futures and anachronistically bring references of the past to the present. It proposes the idea of “ a non-linear, non-perspectival, ‘artistic’ time”. This model of artistic time is argued by Nagel and Woods in *Interventions: Towards a New Model of Renaissance Anachronism* as being

“ more interesting than merely linear historical time..... The time of art with its densities interruptions, juxtapositions, and recoveries, come to resemble the topology of memory itself..... a threat to the certainties of empirical historical data”.

This empirical model of Art history, where time is divided into epoch, movement or style, could arguably suffer from what Bergson described as the ".... *illusions of retrospective determinism.*" This Anachronic shift in reading is in marked contrast to earlier analysis within Iconographical readings of an artwork. Previously much of the emphasis was placed on the temporal experience on perceiving the work rather than the temporal readings within the work. For example as outlined in WJT Mitchells *Temporality in the Perception of the Artwork and its subject*

“The claim that painting, for instance, must be scanned in some temporal interval, is met with the counterargument that these temporal processes are not determined or constrained by the object itself. We can perform these scannings in any order we wish (more or less), and we know throughout this process that we are the ones moving in time, whereas the "object itself remains stable and static in an unvarying spatial configuration. “.

If as Bergson points out that “*Evolution in general would fain go on in a straight line;*” the experience and conditions of an artworks complex relationship to time may have been neglected in Art History’s attempt to affect a similar line.

Which brings us to the overlap of first and second areas that of the temporal anomalies and the conservation of an artwork.

It also allows us to challenge Mitchell’s previous claims as I would propose that the object itself does not remain stable is not static and may have frequently altered spatial and material configurations, itself a witness to an entropic progress arguably deteriorating in slow motion once it is made.

In her seminal essay *Post Minimal Intervention* Caroline Villers states quite unequivocally that “*The assumption that a conservation treatment is neutral and does not*

alter meaning is untenable". This reflective and self-questioning of Conservation, which for the purposes of this presentation is understood as the compilation of preservation and restoration practices, is emblematic of much discourse in Contemporary Conservation Theory. As outlined by Conservator Alison Redmond; 19th century Conservation sought to Preserve the authentic work of art, unsullied by any visible restorative act and accept the patina of entropic damage which validated the authenticity of the object through time. Twentieth Century Conservation sought to further preserve the integrity of the original with a belief that Science is the most appropriate form for this purpose.

However Conservation has called into question some of its long held assumptions and methods perhaps most relevant to this discussion is

Reversibility (to a greater extent), the nature of an intervention (Villers), the integrity of an original artwork (Dykstra), the dichotomy of the artwork as object, and surface (Barassi)] and

Relativism; the role of objectivity in a relativistic context (Muñoz Viñas), the social responsibilities of Conservation (Clavir), the changing ethical and social framework (Muir), and time, both to and of contemporary art (Berndes).

Reversibility as propounded by Conservator Cesare Brandi (Theory of Restoration, 1963) simply stated means that a conservation process must not damage the original object, all materials should ideally be removable but if this is unavoidable they should not hamper future conservation treatments. Now widely criticized both technically, as very few processes are actually reversible and theoretically, as it seems to alter the historicity of the object, it also highlights a central paradox as outlined by Schinzel

...the belief in reversibility may show, and even be, a fashionable naivety due to unhistorical thinking; the illusion is that something can be undone, which may lead to a lack of responsibility. Paradoxically it is exactly because nothing can be undone that we have to work according to the rules of reversibility, while not forgetting the fact that reversibility is Utopian [14, p.45].

What reversibility is predicated on is problematic, one that the condition of an artwork, for instance a painting, is not the acceptable state for it to remain in the present and that it can be treated in such away as to stabilise further entropic damage mindful of, as Brandi says a 'transmission to the future' and Two by a process in and of itself may be wholly undone thereby negating its own act and temporal intervention.

Embedded in the Reversibility dilemma is an underlying assumption that the artwork itself has a determinable ideal status or condition, one that can be derived through the History of the object and empirical investigation. In the past dubious decisions have been made to restore works to a near 'pristine' condition as if unaffected by any temporal experience, thereby denying the notion of historical wholeness (for example see Crimes against the Cubist-Richardson 1983). However its corollary now as to the definition of an authentic state is problematic. If a work exists in an historic state yet could be said to need conservation treatment the only outcome as Villers posits quoting the conservator Munoz Vinas is

If a painting is imagined as a palimpsest then the only logical response is non-intervention because as Munoz Vinas succinctly puts it 'the only authentic state is tautologically the one it has now'." Post Minimal Intervention Villers 2004.

Similarly at a recent conference Yves Alain Bois suggested that an artworks conservation should be mindful of all the treatments made to it even if patently incorrect as they are authentic acts of that time. To which a fellow panelist sharply replied "*everything is an authentic something!*", perhaps one step of relativity too far.

This issue seems to echo Bergson's relationship to the viability of times reversibility in the face of "hard science". While acknowledging the perceived misreading of Einstein's theories by Bergson, his findings have laterally been endorsed through the field of Complex dynamics, re-establishing a Times Arrow paradigm. Perhaps conservations issues, its questioning of the relevance of empirical hard science methodology, its navigation in a "sea of relativity" Bomford and its temporal successionist critiques of the authentic art object would be aided through an analysis of Bergson's Creative Evolution.

Drawing shares many affinities with Conservation. Each has a reluctance to offer a single definition of their practice, both can respond to pre-existing artworks, they can share a manual and mechanical engagement with a surface, both make or remove marks, they can consider the source of their work as both object and surface and both have an awareness of the temporal in their outcomes.

Drawing and Time –

When discussing drawing it is important to state that I am locating it in an Art and Design context only and not other forms. Historically one of the roles

drawing played was the “other” activity to a more concrete outcome; the plan for a sculpture or building, a working drawing for an object, a preliminary draft or cartoon for a painting or a the production of a literal copy. Always ancillary and anticipatory all pointing to a future outcome.

SHOW SLIDE - Craig Martin

This historical positioning is summarized by artist Michael Craig Martin’s catalogue essay that

.... experimentation, modesty of means, rawness, fragmentation, discontinuity, unfinishedness, and open-endedness. These have always been the characteristics of drawing.

While current Drawing discourse challenges this claim it does however historically ground the provisional and becoming status of a drawing. This *becoming* model is further developed by Art Historian Norman Bryson. Bryson proposes that drawing has a distinction in that it “...always exists in the present tense, in the time of unfolding...Painting, relatively speaking, exists in the tense of the completed past: We know the image only in its final arrested state, not in the ongoing present of its coming into form. If painting presents Being, the [drawing] presents Becoming” (Bryson 2003: 149-150)

The act of a drawing is itself a double temporal gesture in that it is both a present simultaneously becoming a past, or graphically a performance that becomes a trace, with an attendant finished unfinishedness – alluding to a future or consecutive presents. Again Bryson when considering the drawing act suggests a "continuous incompleteness" he describes

"a hand that is about to make its first trace on the surface.. .the present of viewing and the present of the drawn line hook on to each other, mesh together like interlocking temporal gears; they co-inhabit an irreversible, permanently open and exposed field of becoming, whose moment of closure will never arrive." (2003: 150 & 153)

A subset of this paradigm is evident in Yves-Alain Bois suggestion that certain drawing practices as "projective", that is, "they depict something that has been imagined before it is drawn, as opposed to being found through the process of making..." (Hoptman, 2002: 12)

It is this useful distinction that I wish to consider the following images

SLIDE

Amande In and Cornelia Parker.

Both of these images attest to a form of foregrounding the temporal reading of the works. With 5.22 the title describes the length of the line, anchoring it within a process led genre of drawing, internalizing the time of the drawing. In contrast with Cornelia Parkers photograph *Einstein's Abstracts* (1999) of referencing a pre-existing artefact or artwork- fixing. In this case images from the blackboard covered with Einstein's equations from his 1931 Oxford lecture on the theory of relativity at the Museum of the History of Science, Oxford. Shot at extremely high magnification, Parker suggests that "*the chalk marks look like shreds of cloud seen from space, or the dusty surface of an unknown planet*".

It is the latter model, which has a multi-temporal reading that will be the concluding focus of this presentation.

SLIDE – DES LAWRENCE

Lawrence's series of drawings and texts take their starting point from the obituary columns of daily newspapers.

They present a layering of time that is repeated in the serial nature of his work, and not least through the sheer labour of his portraits. The detailed rendering of publicity photographs of the recently deceased are often taken from another era, when the subjects were in their prime. His accompanying obituary text blurs the boundaries between lived fact and fiction as the writing becomes corrupted by lies and false anecdotes. A further layer of time is added to the images, by the process of using silver to draw. The exposure of the silver to air causes the image to tarnish, and fade over time, thus mirroring that of the subject.

SLIDE – Stefana McClure Don't Look Now:

McClure's drawings are re-creations of the dialogues from translated films. Her time-consuming and complicated method entails copying the text from a frame of a subtitled film, thereby creating a compressed temporal palimpsest.

SLIDE – Stefana McClure Decalog

While the drawings use the exact dialogue from the film, the overlapping of the text fails to reveal the source, arguably a comment perhaps on the effects of time and memory.

SLIDE – BEYOND THE ROCKS

Within my own practice I attempt, like many practitioners, to foreground questions or issues of which the bi-product is a drawing. In my case around notions of entropy, decay, conservation and the problematic idea of the timeless artwork (be it a still or moving image) in this case. These are stills from the restoration work on the 1922 film *Beyond the Rocks* that were not part of the restored digitised version due to the extent of their damaged state.

RUN THROUGH 3 SLIDES

1. These 3 images look at conservation imagery in this slide to attempt to record the time of the original painting before it was finished, also revealing the painted support and materiality of the object/image
2. This is a mapping of both the gunshot and entropic damage to the National Gallery's Burlington Cartoon. The image to the left maps the 'wound' while the smaller image depicts the conservation required.
3. The last drawing is a digital had drawing mapping the crackle surface of a Vermeer painting that had been stolen, damaged and subsequently restored.

SLIDE - NABOKOV

As highlighted by Bergson the relationship of the past to the present in asymmetrical and as Ponty states this is also asymmetrical to the future

And as Nabokov points out in *Transparent Things* : “*Perhaps if the future existed, concretely and individually, as something that could be discerned by a better brain, the past would not be so seductive: its demands would be balanced by those of the future.*”

Evolution implies a real persistence of the past in the present, a duration which is not an interval between two states, but which links them together still has much to offer the art object in transition.

Texts

Bryson, Norman. 2003. “A Walk for a Walk's Sake”, in Catherine de Zegher (ed.), *The Stage of Drawing*. New York: Tate Publishing & The Drawing Centre: 149-158.